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## Synoptic Excursus of Ancient Greek Concept of Mind from Thales to the Stoics

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### Abstract

This work examines the concept of 'Mind' in Greek philosophy. It is an excursus from Thales to the Stoics. Our aim is to know the reason why the ancient Greeks counterpose each other's idea as regards the concept of Mind. Our method is historically synoptic while juxtaposing 'Mind' and 'Soul' to mean the same thing. The mind is the human element that makes him rational and allows the ability to be conscious of reality. Greek philosophy perceives mind from a broad perspective as sanction from the gods and Greek mythologies. It is the prime principle of life that gives light to the body. The pre-Socratic idea of mind had Anaximenes' view of air compared with the 'soul' as the source that binds all things together. The Pythagoreans hold the view that man has both a higher and lower nature where thought and reflection are inferred. Anaxagoras identified Nous (mind) as the force that caused and formed the planets from a primitive mass. Democritus identified the soul or mind as a chance of atomic collision. The Socratic idea of mind has Gorgias' view of Mind as an entity of two opposite poles, speech and Logos. Socrates conceives soul as an entity with the capacity to distinguish between particular things and universal things. Plato dualized the soul as embodiment of essence with mind capable of thinking and willing. For Aristotle, the mind is part of the human soul. The soul is triad – The vegetative, the sensitive and the rational. The Epicurean idea has no mind but matter alone as that which constitutes all nature. The Stoics employed several analogies as explanation to the idea of mind; physics, logic and ethics. Thus, there is no common conception of the idea tagged mind in Ancient Greek philosophical literature.

**Key words:** *Ancient Greek, Mind, Thales, Stoics, Philosophy.*

### 1. Introduction

Bertrand Russell, it was that said, (from the point of view of the natural sciences, "physics"), that the world as it is, is a movement of series of events. Put this the other way round, from the point of view of philosophy, the world is, or the whole of reality is one of conflicts. The conflicts here are usually on ground of philosophical problems that often arise as a result of what constructive or critical task is pursued by men in quest of the ultimate truth about reality. The critical task of philosophy, we know, is to question truth claims. The constructive task of philosophy is that of which it develops a picture of the whole world-view such that all elements in our quest of knowledge and the various aspects of our individual and group experience will get their proper position.

The lasting conflicts that do rise in philosophy are from what sub-summed the ideas of the naturalistic and the non-naturalistic accounts about reality. What the naturalistic account will hold is a one order of reality where every thing, objects and events occur in space and time, every thing also self-dependent and self-working. For this school of thought, once you have a complete knowledge of the natural or physical universe, it means a complete knowledge of the whole of reality. A denial of this view of the naturalistic account is a denial of reality. But the non-naturalistic account would argue to say human beings, though part of this reality possess mind or soul quite different that is not placed under such category of just a physical entity alone in that reality. They still may argue that the physical reality is governed and controlled by a higher reality, upon which the physical is depended for its orderliness. Yet that reality does not consist in the physical world.

A touch with history of philosophy shows that Homer and Hesiod, the Greek poets replicated this pattern of reasoning, from which point the shaping of the Greek concept of mind developed. The Greek concept of mind derives its

development from the moral perspective, we may say, moral philosophy whether it was the “gods” or “fate” that decide the fortunes or misfortunes of men.

The article, examines the concept of mind in Greek philosophy. We shall apply some philosophical excursus from Thales of Miletus, down to the period of the Stoics in ancient Greek philosophy. In establishing this, we shall consider what makes them counter-pose each other’s idea as regards the concept of mind. We shall refer here in this essay to ‘mind’ and ‘soul’ as one thing except where, for point of emphasis, which may arise as a result of what is being construed by the different eras of the philosophies, we may vary.

It is also worthy of note here too, that the concept of mind in ancient Greek philosophy is a metaphysical problem. In other words, we cannot treat this aspect very successfully without a cogent attention given to the foundation that makes the concept stand. Hence, much of what we shall discuss in this piece amplifies a metaphysical bearing and outlook; if we must successfully get at what the Greeks sought to make us know.

## **2. What is ‘Mind’ in Philosophy?**

The mind, as we conceived it is that aspect of the human being that gives him/her the ability to be conscious of things. That is, it involves the application of our empirical perceptive power where all that matters in experience or sense perception is evoked to work. When we think of it again from the point of view of intelligence, thought and memory, we may mean the ability of its power to cognitively and intuitively eclipse what is given out there in reality for our understanding. The mind brings us to the awareness of itself and ourselves as the “self” or “I”. Invariably, the mind may be defined as that aspect of being (human being in this case) that allows it the ability of perception, imagination, thought, intelligence, emotion, memory, identity and action.

The various conceptions of mind follow therefore as; intellect or reason, thinking substance, attribute of God which is thought, soul or spirit, understanding, judgment, reason, self consciousness, universally knowledgeable, totality of mental processes, principle of purposive behaviours, etcetera.

Granted this brief definition of what the idea ‘mind’ refers to, we shall see how the ancient Greeks conceive it and what they mean when they speak of mind.

## **3. The Greek Concept of Mind**

Greek philosophy of mind never conceived this field of study as being distinct from what the gods and Greek mythologies gave. However, with growing quest of the truth, it has come to have a broader perception when such key concepts like ‘perception’, ‘thought’, ‘imagination’ and ‘cognition’ etcetera, are mentioned. It has no difference, no doubt, when the ancient Greeks referred to the concept ‘mind’ as ‘soul’. But still, put it comparatively with modern Cartesian and post-Cartesian idea, the meaning extends. The concept of mind or soul in ancient Greek portrays a broader and closer connection with basic body functions. They first see it as the prime principle of life. In other words, the mind or soul gives light to the body. They also conceive it as that which accounts for the psychological processes which has been mentioned in our introductory aspect of the brief definition of mind. The soul or mind is also said to be responsible for such biological functions and processes of the body as growth, respiration, digestion, motion and procreation. Hence, a triad conception of the concept is assumed.

## **4. The Pre-Socratic Idea of Mind**

Looking at one of such broader perspectives from which Greek philosophy of mind was cast is Anaximenes’ earliest idea of the concept of the basic element of the universe. He made efforts to proceed from his master Anaximander, who, had projected the (apeiron) unlimited boundless. To him, it was Air, the source of which the whole universe consist of, and the source of all creation. Comparing this source with our human ‘soul’, he said it was the source that binds all things together.

Thus, in this case, Anaximenes had identified something invaluable as soul which he likened to be like the basic element (Air or breath) which binds us together. According to Onyewuenyi, (1994) a statement ascribed to him from William Turner’s *History of Philosophy* pointed to Anaximenes as saying that “just as our soul, being air, holds us together, so do breathe and air encompass the world (169). In this case, the soul is a capacitor that gives strength to human body for all its idea denoting the implicit conception of the nature of what ancient Greek philosophers mean when they speak of the soul. That is to say, there is a basic substance from which we are propelled apart from what we think of the universe to consist of. Their ability to think in terms of the element that constitutes the universe is a confirmation or assent to the fact that something like that element too, do exist, from which the basic element is compared. In this case, there is a substance that constitutes air or breath. The logic of action now being justified by

reason of our human ability to speak, which proceeds from an unseen inner force called thought. Granted that our words are thoughts expressed, it is therefore necessarily correct to think in line with reason that such thoughts proceed from a soul or mind just like air is compared to it. In other words, if thought is a word compressed, and a word compressed is a thought expressed, invariably, we can cast it in the mould of air which gives the soul life from which the ancient Greeks say is the prime beginning, the fulcrum around which all living things revolve.

Next in this line of reasoning was the Pythagoreans' conception of the human soul. They agreed that man has a soul, which is confined in the human body and can leave one's body at the level of attainment of salvation if the person lived a virtuous life on earth. But where purification as the guiding principle was not achieved, then at death of the body, the soul migrates from one body to another. A continuous process follows until purification was acquired. Once it is achieved, the soul transits to the realm of happiness or the world of bliss. But if the soul remained unclean, it will be punished finally at what they called Tartarus. However, though the Pythagoreans did not clearly speak of the soul as mind, but there is an inference to the issue of sensibility and reasoning when the principle of harmonious relationship among the human faculties is raised. Close to this doctrine of Transmigration and Immortality of the Soul is that of the Supreme Good which is attained by living a virtuous life. There is an unconsciousness that is subordinated to the higher consciousness. In other words, the Pythagoreans hold the view that man has both a higher and lower nature where thought and reflection are inferred. However, Anaxagoras became the first critical pioneer of the concept of mind in ancient Greek philosophy. According to Stumpf (1982):

He rejected Empedocles' account that the formation of the objects of an experience is the product of the forces of love and hate. The process of change called for a more adequate explanation ..., than one based on the ambiguous and quasi-mythical elements of love and hate. The world and all its objects appeared to him a well ordered and intricate structure requiring as a principle of explanation a being with knowledge and power. Such a rational principle is what Anaxagoras proposed in his concept of mind (22).

Anaxagoras held that it is the mind which he called *Nous* that has force of the formation of the world from a primitive mass. It is this mind that has control over all condensation and separation. It has the power of forming together like particles and the removal of matter. Omeregbe (1996) added that for Anaxagoras, *Nous* or spirit is the original reality that caused the planets to motion, and it was the same mind that oversees the whole universe. However, he explained that Anaxagoras does not conceive the philosophy of creation out of nothing since it was foreign to Greek idea and mind. According to him, Anaxagoras held that:

*Nous* ..., set universe in motion and then began to govern it. Matter is eternal and uncreated. The material universe is composed of particles and everything in it is a combination of particles of all other things and is related to all other things ... the only exception of this network of interconnection is *Nous*. *Nous* is separate from the material Universe and superior to it ... is infinite and self-ruled, mixed with nothing, but is alone, itself by itself .... Present everywhere ... power over all things ... power over the whole revolution ... it began to revolve at the start ... without being of the universe ... without being its creator, *Nous* set it in motion and began to govern it (138).

Democritus also conceived of the idea of soul. But this soul, like every other material thing in the universe came by chance of the collision and coming together of atoms. According to this idea, Democritus held that human soul consist of atoms which dissolve back to the state of collision and into chance, just as it was formed when it came together as the body dies. Our line of thought here follows from his ethical theory of happiness. There is a recognition of body and soul, and of thought, which he said is greater than the body and superior to it. And since for him the whole universe is a deterministic and materialistic one, and things come to be by chance and go out of existence the same way, man is bound to pursue happiness, the greatest of which shall give the right disposition of mind or soul. Worldly pleasure does not count as happiness of the mind or soul. For him, the soul is the attractive point of the divine where cheerfulness and well being guarantee unmitigated peace of mind.

#### **The Socratic Concept of Mind**

In his epistemology, talking about the tragedy of knowledge, Gorgias speaks of two opposite poles; human action and the laws of reality. Human action, he represented as speech while the laws of reality stand for *Logos* which has the power to persuade and to deceive the mind. For Gorgias, there is a mind that is deceived by power of persuasion. He called these persuasive power *Logos*. He says this *Logos* does not only persuade but equally deceive the mind. Thus, he

reached a climax of showing a duality of the mechanism of Logos. Persuasion was regarded by the Greek mind as having some rational character and also having some force of demonic fury against those who run unethical life and contrary to justice. Deception has similar ambivalent character of persuasion. Both persuasion and deception, Gorgias argued, are determined by an activity of the mind (Untersteiner 1954: 1-129).

Notwithstanding his doubt about the non-existence, his conditional statement of a thing's existence, his conclusion of an acceptability of a thing and a subsequent knowledge of a thing's existence which cannot be communicated to others, yet we understand him in the conclusive premise to uphold the existence of a thing. Though with such a background, he was not denying actually the non-existence of a thing but whether we can say with certainty that any truth-claim cannot be faulted or remain indubitable? Holding to his opinion, the issue then became the provoking thesis of the time which he said there existed an irrational domination of the soul by what is termed Logos. In this case, Gorgias recognized the soul which is an intelligible capacity of humanity that is always often over-come and fallible to the power of Logos.

The shifting ground of the Sophistic-Socratic conception of mind in Greek philosophy reached its peak with the emergence of Socrates the master. His preoccupation with the concept of mind was how to give meaning to words. In other words, how the human soul or mind has the capacity to distinguish between particular things and universal or general things. For Socrates, when we talk of a beautiful thing we tend to make a distinction between the thing referred to and the idea of beauty in which the beautiful thing partakes. For Socrates, as Stumpf (1982) opined:

Only by the rigorous process of defining does the mind finally grasp the distinction between a particular thing... and the general fixed notion (Beauty)..., Socrates indicated that true knowledge ... have to do with power of the mind to discover in facts the abiding elements that remain after the facts disappear (38-39).

We would say here that all that Socrates did included, beyond this physical realm, a conception of the human mind that has the ability to discover what is out there beyond the sensible realm. It follows therefore that "man", no longer "was the measure of all things". In other words, Socrates had to turn around the materially naturalistic tendency of Greek mind-set; decay in politics, religion, social and cultural attitudes of the Greeks. The reform which he instituted (Azikiwe 1968) took the form of "man know thyself" (Gnothi Seauton). This shows a reversal of what the Greek mind-set and the idea of mind, had been. In this case, man is not only man but man with a divine something which can reach the highest stage of spiritual consciousness. An eternity that has a voice which can advise and guide humanity towards the attainment of both the naturally physical and the spiritually intelligible. His method employed a fresher way of reasoning. A way that resurrected the Greek understanding on how to tap their critical power of reflection (Stumpf & Abel 2002). This was the fulcrum, for Socrates, around which the Greek concept of mind should revolve. Plato's conception of mind is not too distinct from his master's except from what was orally granted which is not artistically marked on the surface of papers. For Plato, the human intellect or reason became the power of the soul of man, quite distinct from other parts of empirical understanding. The soul for Plato, is embodiment of essence. That there is something in the soul which is called mind. Mind for him is that which is capable of thinking and willing. It is that which can intuit or have direct apprehension of intelligible objects, that "which is able to reason discursively about the idea it can contemplate" (Hutchins 1990: 126). For him, the soul is the principle of life and movement. Since the body cannot move itself because it is subject to perishable things, it must respond when in action to that principle of life, called soul. This is the purpose why Plato granted the soul its tripartite natures of reason, spirit and appetite, which are confections of the mind. Irrespective of the internal confusion and conflict we do have as men due to our ignorance based on the workings of these elements of the soul or mind, there is orderliness that flows from the spirited element to check the other two elements, reason and appetite; all being the function of the soul.

Aristotle equally conceived the Greek mind chiefly as ascribed by Hutchins:

For him, as for Plato, the human intellect or reason is a part or power of the soul of man ;;; though the human soul is distinguished from the souls of other living things ... is therefore called by Aristotle a "rational soul: (25).

The mind for Aristotle, is part of the human soul. The soul is form while matter is becoming. Since matter is not actuality, it is the form that is actual, the soul, is the form that organizes the body. Both soul and body exist together and are inseparable, yet they are not identical. For Aristotle, the soul is "the first grade of actuality of a natural organized body, the definitive formula of a thing's essence". It exists when there is a particular kind of body as "one having in itself the power of setting itself in movement and arresting itself" (Stumpf 1982: 94). We see Aristotle distinguishing

the soul like Plato into three, namely, the vegetative, the sensitive and the rational. These, he said represent the various functions of the body in their capacity.

## **6. The Epicurean and the Stoics Ideas of Mind**

### *6.1 Epicurean Idea*

The Epicurean conception of mind took the course of Democritus' atomic substance that inhabits the universe. Having been influenced by the physics of Democritus, Epicurus rejected anything including humanity as having been created by any order inferred to have been responsible for creation. Man came and existed by chance just as every other substance in nature was formed by the clustering of atoms due to their collisions. That being the case, he argued in his idea of 'God and Dead' that since man was not the creation of any God, who himself does not exist but rather being a product of an accidental discharge of atoms, man need not fear God or dead. The fear of God and dead ceased to be since only a living thing can have sensation of pain or pleasure. Epicurus at this point raised the idea of the human mind to say that it no longer can feel the sensation of pain and pleasure since the body parts with the mind at death as their atoms part with themselves to the nature of the original cycle of matter. The summary of Epicurus' idea is a total rejection of anything incorporeal as only corporeal things do exist here and now. There is no mind but matter alone which constitutes all of nature.

### *6.2 Stoics Idea*

The Stoics philosophy derived its name from the Stoa, a school founded by Zeno (335-263BC). Their teachings regarding the soul can be gleaned from their philosophy of physics, logic and ethics. In physics, the substance of the soul or mind is related to God and the cosmos and how it functions in the human body. In logic, it is related to the theory of meaning and truth (similar to that of Socrates, Zeno himself being influenced by Socratic doctrine of ethics) based upon its dependence on the theory of perception, thinking and some psychological concepts. In ethics, it is related to a complex theory of motion and psychology of action which had enormous impact on the moral or ethical philosophy.

For the Stoics, the mind is related to an active nature with an internal combustion of fire or vital heat. This vital fire or heat is also called pneuma. This pneuma is held to be the substance of the particular souls of living organisms. It is also the organizing principle of the cosmos. This pneuma, permeates the human body from the world-soul which is responsible for the pneuma of humanity and the cosmos. This, they called God. For them, the human soul is one portion of God. They contend that the soul or mind is a bodily substance, which is further contrasted as soul and matter. The former being the active substance, and the latter passive. Both passive and active principles are all but one in matter. The active substance is reason. The more active its power the more rational and divine the being. The more passive, the more material it is. Thus, only human beings and gods possess the highest active pneumas as reason. For them, the soul permeates the body as heat permeates iron rods, occupying equal space but having qualitative nature. The parts which are light, vision, smell, taste, thought, reproduction, speech and action faculty – The heart, called the hegemonikon. It is observed that several analogies were employed by the Stoics to give explanation to the structure of the soul or mind. In summary, the Stoics gave a deterministic order of things where even the human mind is involved, since one thing in the universe is a relation of the other (Rubarth 2005: 17).

## **7. Overview**

Our major line of action seems to be for us to understand whether Greek philosophy sees what mind is as mind or, are there minds apart from the human mind and the entire cosmos of corporeal existence? This is the drawing line from which we took off to try to understand what, when the Greeks say "mind", they mean either one universally absolute entity or what? It follows therefore that from whatever truth-claim we make of the various theories gaining currency, there is a conception of mind. But whether as a universal property of matter, either as super human minds, or an absolute but one single mind of transcendent intelligence, is what we cannot beg the question.

However, whatever the pre-Socratics from Thales to Democritus did, and from Socrates to the Stoics, there is an agenda of action which shows that all of them imply different conceptions of the element tagged "mind" with all its symptoms. Their point of departure is the reason for our concern to see the tensions that existed between opinions in the course of the speculations as it were, so that we were able to reflect on them, based on contemporary issues in philosophy.

It is of a truth that the Hellenic mind went step by step with deep compulsion to the point of some of them dissolving all the ideas of the physical and that of the beyond. Granted that Homer had given us a picture of life beyond the physical



or grave as wretched, it follows from the ensuring atmosphere (from Thales to the preceding period of Socrates) that a point or climax is reached beyond that of Homer. That climax culminated almost in the total collapse of the concept of mind as merely materially inclined without any absolute fringes. But from the Socratic era, we found a legend having the conception of an interplay of physical reality with the intelligible super-formal realm beyond the physical realm from which Plato built his foundation of the world, distinct from the sensitive reality of empirical perception.

The traditional theory of mind in ancient Greek philosophy means what Plato and Aristotle in their own versions say. The range of the concept poses towards mental activity. While for Plato it was an insensitive activity, Aristotle professed a matter of abstraction by the mind or an active intellect. Plato and Aristotle view the mind as part of the human soul.

Stoicism on its part gave us a view of a pantheistic and mechanistic concept of mind. The mind is a corporeal entity and one which obeys the laws of nature, preferably the laws of physics. To them the concept of mind is broader than our modern concept of mind.

### 8. Conclusion

A summary of all the great gulf that lies between the physical and mental realities in ancient Greek philosophy is in the first instance, that an aspect called mind is. Second, is how it can be breached from such independence which the physical and the mental realities possess. Thus, all we have found in ancient Greek philosophy is that there exists no common conception of the concept tagged mind as most of them gave it different names based on some phenomenal realities. Notwithstanding all this, what interests us mostly is the fact that all what they did pointed us to determining whether there was a kind of natural virus inherent in their nature of reasoning that may have infected their prowess to recognize the concept as a single entity or it was a way of the democratic nature of the Greeks at presupposing the intellectual pathologies of the concept. Apparently, whether it was a virus, it was a curable type that helped in shaping and propelling the development of intellectual therapies of understanding the concept from an objective capacity given each individual's or group of individuals' disposition to knowledge. The various positions of understanding the concept had helped in removing any delusions to knowledge but posing a conviction that Greek antiquity possesses some sort of truth about how knowledge at various capacities could be initiated. It is democratic indeed because they also bequeathed what we tag here as 'knowledge freedom' from that crude beginning. However, no matter what their different dispositions may have been about understanding the concept of mind or soul, one thing remains—it is the fact that rather than confusing knowledge the ancient Greeks contributed to the epistemic foundation on how men by nature are capable of exploring their ingenuity to understanding reality contrary to what Gjertsen (2003) called obscure messages in ancient texts.

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